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Source: *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 63, No. 1 (1993), pp. 36-55

Published by: [Cambridge University Press](#) on behalf of the [International African Institute](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1161297>

Accessed: 15/06/2014 08:50

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AGRARIAN CHANGE AND AGRARIAN CRISIS: STATE AND PEASANTRY IN POST-REVOLUTION ETHIOPIA

Dessalegn Rahmato

INTRODUCTION¹

In the closing days of May 1991 the Stalinist military regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam, which had been in power for nearly a decade and a half, was overthrown by rebel forces. When the final obituary of Mengistu's regime is written, historians will not fail to note that the seeds of its humiliating downfall were sown by its own doctrinaire agrarian policies, which led to the hardening of state-peasant relations, and eventually to the complete alienation of the peasantry from the regime. The reform of agrarian Stalinism which was hurriedly launched in 1990 failed to rally the peasantry to the side of the state, and may even have added to its further paralysis. At any rate, the reform came much too late to make a difference in the continuing crisis of food production, to defuse peasant dissatisfaction or to stave off rural insurgency, which since the beginning of the 1980s had been feeding on rural discontent. This study focuses on the evolving relations between the peasantry and the military government in the period 1975–90, and is, I believe, of considerable interest to students of agrarian reform, and of the agrarian history of contemporary Ethiopia.

That the agrarian crisis of the country, which continued unabated in the period under review and which was manifested over the years in growing rural poverty, food shortages and famine, and escalating rural insurgency, was the consequence of contradictions in state policy has been noted by many observers (Clapham, 1988; chapter 7, for example).² What has not often been considered is that the crisis also stemmed from the politicisation of agriculture and agricultural change, and the redefinition of state-peasant relations primarily to promote ill-conceived political goals.

The tragedy of Ethiopia's agrarian experience lies in the following. Judged by conventional yardsticks, the radical land redistribution programme of 1975 was quite successful. The abolition of landlordism, the most essential element of success in reform, has been complete. The poor and underprivileged were to a large extent beneficiaries, acquiring land during redistribution (Dessalegn, 1984). However, the system of *free* small-holder production which was emerging out of the reform was not given the chance to prove itself. As in China and Vietnam, there was a rapid shift of policy towards collectivisation, which was often imposed on an unwilling peasantry and implemented under unfavourable conditions (see Table 1). Collectivisation is a reversal of land reform as much as a deprivation of the autonomy of the peasant cultivator.

Though this is not often recognised, the military regime's post-reform agrarian policies were modelled in part on the experience of China and Vietnam. The magnitude of collectivisation was much less than in the Asian countries, but that was not the result of a gradualist approach favoured by

TABLE 1 Ethiopia: agrarian periodisation

<i>Period</i>	<i>Major events</i>	<i>Major policies</i>
1975–78	War with Somalia	Land reform legislation Implementation of reform PAs formed Peasant exaction begins
1979–82	War in north: Red Star campaign against rebels in north	Socialisation policies: State farms Co-operatives Media war on ‘Kulaks’ Food grain quotas Restrictions on grain merchants and grain movements
1983–88	Famine Epidemic Party formed Rural insurgency	Speed up socialisation Villagisation Resettlement Peasant evictions Food price rises Corruption in rural enterprises
1988–89	War in north continued Insurgency continued	Lull, brought on by: Policy contradictions Agricultural decline Peasant disaffection Food crisis looms again
1990	Civil war Paralysis of state	New rural reforms Peasants dismantle collectivisation
1991	Collapse of military regime.	

Source. Own field and research notes.

the Ethiopian authorities so much as due to the immense difficulties that lay in the way of collectivising millions of peasant households. Moreover, unlike China or Vietnam, the regime's policies were launched by administrative fiat, often hurriedly or secretly, and without consultation with peasants and peasant leaders. The regime did not have the kind of disciplined, dedicated and experienced party activists at the village level that played such a crucial role in China and Vietnam both in promoting collectivisation and in helping maintain the legitimacy of the socialist state among the rural population (Moise, 1983; Nolan, 1988).

POST-REVOLUTION AGRARIAN POLICY, 1975–90

In the first few years of the revolution, roughly in the period 1975–78, the agrarian policies pursued by the military government, which had deposed the old regime in the last quarter of 1974, were in the main pro-peasant and

had a strong populist flavour. While there was a good deal of uncertainty among the peasantry about the events unfolding at the time, the government did win a measure of popularity in the countryside once the significance of the land reform (announced in early 1975) became clear to the peasantry. Most peasants welcomed the dispossession of the landed classes, which was one of the aims of the reform. Soon, however, there was a radical change as the revolution hardened and adopted Soviet-style socialism as its guiding principle.

The distinctive aspect of the period that followed was that, on the one hand, rural policy grew increasingly doctrinaire and, on the other, left no room for testing and evaluating individual programmes to ascertain their viability and adaptability. The peasantry came to be regarded not as an active force of the revolution but as a passive recipient of socialist directives channelled from above. Rural programmes were initiated and implemented without any serious discussion of their merits, not even within the line Ministries responsible for their execution. Moreover, so many different programmes, each nation-wide in scope, were being run at one and the same time that implementation was invariably poor and vast resources were wasted, partly because the programmes were too ambitious and ill-conceived, and partly because there was not enough trained manpower to carry them out at the local level.

Throughout most of the 1980s rural policy consisted of state agriculture, collectivisation, grain requisitioning, resettlement, villagisation and, of course, famine relief. All except the last were considered as integral elements of agricultural socialisation. In the first half of the decade, fresh redistribution of land was taking place in several parts of the country, often initiated by extension agents as part of a readjustment plan designed to pave the way for the introduction of the collectivisation. By the end of the 1980s, however, the socialist offensive had become blunted, owing in part to what one might call 'socialisation fatigue', and in part to the fact that the resources of the state could not cope with the immense tasks involved (Dessalegn, 1987b). While the majority of peasants seemed to be passively involved in the new programmes, there were forms of resistance ranging from silent non-compliance to outright rejection which made the task of implementation more difficult. As I have dealt with many of these programmes at length elsewhere I shall present only a summary discussion of the main ones here.³ I shall begin with the land reform which was the basis of all rural programmes.

The 1975 reform, comparable to the Chinese and Vietnamese reforms in its thoroughness, transferred all land to *public ownership* and prohibited all forms of private land ownership, including those of smallholders. The peasant household had only usufruct rights over the land it cultivated. It could not transfer those rights to others by sale, lease or mortgage. At one stroke the landed classes were completely dispossessed without compensation. Land redistribution was to proceed on the principle of equalisation of holdings, and hired labour was forbidden. In effect, land was nationalised, and the state replaced the landlord as the owner of the land. This is an important point, because it gave the state ultimate rights over the disposition of land. Extension agents often routinely alienated land belong-

ing to peasants or their communities for a variety of purposes, including co-operatives, state farms and village schemes. Without this power, collectivisation, villagisation or resettlement programmes would have been difficult to implement. This also significantly extended the ability of the state to intrude in all aspects of peasant life.

Local peasant communities were empowered to set up what were known as Peasant Associations (PAs). These organisations were made up of all household heads in each community, and they were given authority to redistribute land, maintain common assets, resolve conflicts and enable development activities taking place in their areas. They were to serve as a form of popular self-administration. Shortly after they were established, however, they were 'captured' by the state and used to carry out a variety of political functions, including collecting taxes, maintaining law and order, channelling directives to the peasantry, enforcing the government's grain requisition programmes (see below) and later recruiting young men for the military.

The chances of success of such a radical land reform were considerably enhanced because at the time of implementation conditions in the rural areas were very volatile, the political temperature in the country as a whole was unusually high, and the landed classes were in no position to put up effective or sustained resistance. Tenure reform may be considered a success if it achieves two critical goals, (1) if it redistributes land and other assets to the peasantry which needs it and thereby promotes social equity, and (2) if it decisively breaks the economic and political power of the landed classes. The military regime's reform may be judged a success on these two counts.

On the other hand – and this is important from the point of view of state–peasant relations – the reform failed in several respects, the most important of which were the following. By redefining tenurial rights in favour of usufruct and against private ownership it gave rise to a levelling down of individual holdings as more beneficiaries made claims to land than could be accommodated. Furthermore, both the new tenure and the mandate given to PAs encouraged the practice of periodic redistribution of land to accommodate new claimants and to correct imbalances. Redistribution was carried out often with the approval and involvement of government agents at the local level, although the PAs had the authority to redistribute land on their own. Redistribution frequently meant losing part of one's allotment or being relocated elsewhere. In brief, reform gave rise to *insecurity of holdings* which was further exacerbated by subsequent policies.

One positive outcome of land reform, which should be noted in the light of the political changes taking place in the country at present, is that reform struck at the roots of ethnic discontent and the conflict latent in ethnic relations, relations in which the land question was always in the foreground and frequently determined conditions of power and influence. By distributing land to peasants resident in a community (and this was one of the justifications of Peasant Associations), reform dispossessed all landlords, in particular those who were not indigenous to the community concerned. This meant that outsiders, mainly landlords from the northern provinces who had extensive holdings in the southern regions and the minority areas,

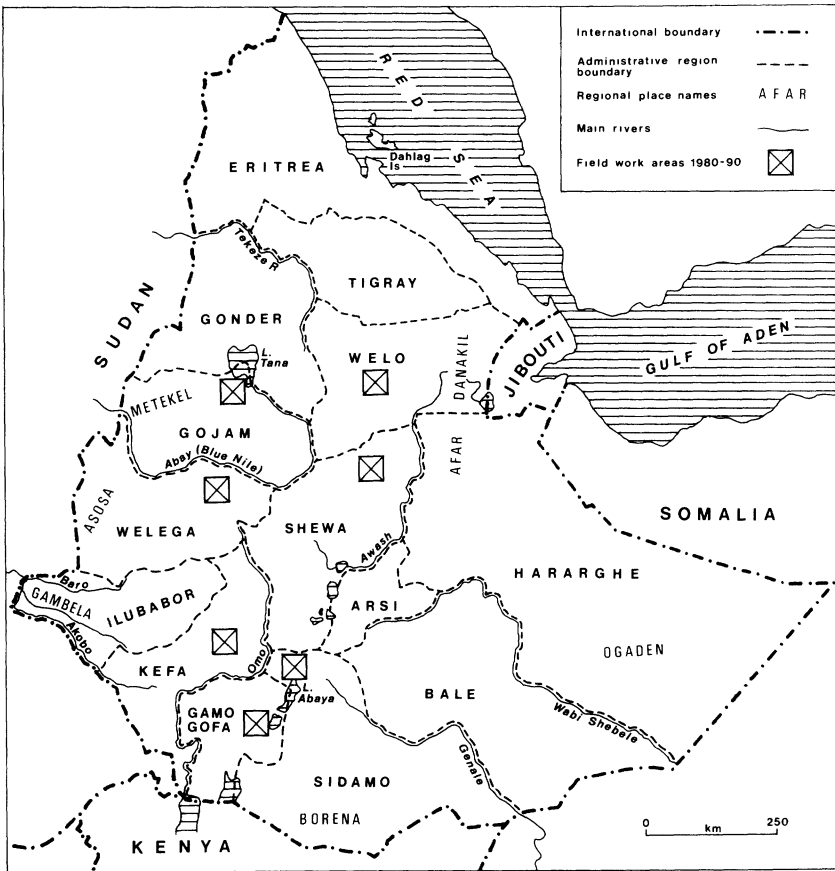


FIG. 1 Ethiopia: administrative regions prior to 1987. [The spelling of Ethiopian place names has not yet been standardised.]

were expropriated and their property was distributed to the indigenous population. The resentment of the nationalities of the south and the minority areas against northerners and the dominant ethnic groups was grounded on the land question; a large part of the land of the subordinate population was alienated for the benefit of landlords from the dominant population, and reform now returned this land to the people who had a legitimate claim to it. It may thus be said that land reform, particularly the abolition of landlordism which was a consequence of it, resolved to a large extent the economic basis of ethnic antagonism and subordination.

In conclusion, the end product of the land reform was that it failed where it succeeded. It transformed rural Ethiopia into a society of self-labouring peasants. To promote social equity it undermined peasant confidence. It redefined the land system in a radical way but in doing so made insecurity of holding an enduring element. It replaced the landlord with the state, providing the latter with direct and unencumbered access to the peasantry.

It politicised land because access to it became increasingly dependent on a host of factors, including peasants' relations with the state-manipulated PAs, compliance with government directives, and the provision of *corvée* labour by peasants to the 'socialist' sector of agriculture which was actively promoted in the 1980s.

Most readers will be familiar with the standard justifications for collectivisation and villagisation, so there is no need to reproduce the arguments here. Briefly, such programmes are believed to boost production, to facilitate modernisation, to improve the well-being of the rural population, and to promote social equity in general. Resettlement programmes are also pursued for the same reasons, as well as to relocate hard-pressed populations to resource-rich areas, and to bring underutilised resources into use. However, what is claimed in theory and what emerges in practice are often two different things. The performance of socialist enterprises (i.e. co-operatives and state farms) and the achievements of villagisation and resettlement were on the whole poor or worse (Dessalegn, 1987b, forthcoming; Alemayehu, 1989). Both high and middle-level state officials were aware of the failure of these programmes. Nevertheless they continued to support them to promote the goals of socialisation. It should be noted that in the majority of cases the programmes were imposed on an unwilling peasantry. Let us briefly look at co-operatives and state farms, two elements of the government's agricultural socialisation strategy. The other programmes will have to be left out for lack of space.

Agricultural socialisation was launched soon after land reform, with heavy investment in state agriculture first, followed by the push for what were known as peasant producer co-operatives. According to the Ten Year Plan drafted in 1984 and expected to run to 1993, the 'transition to socialist agriculture' was to be largely complete by the end of the plan period, when the socialist sector of rural production was expected to become dominant. By that date the sector was expected to be operating some 60 per cent of the cultivable land of the country; food sufficiency was also to be achieved by then. Planners placed high hopes in particular on producers' co-operatives, which were expected to operate over 50 per cent of the nation's cultivable land (some 3.5 million ha) by the end of the plan period. Co-operatives were believed to be more cost-effective, and were seen as the main engine of rural transformation. By the end of the 1980s, however, socialist enterprises altogether were operating less than 15 per cent of the agricultural land of the country (about 1 million ha), far below their plan targets.

The co-operatives that were established were large-scale operations in the formal sense of the term. In the majority of cases, the holdings that were being worked were small in relative terms. Each co-operator in Arsi province, for example, often worked less land than the average individual peasant in the same province. Co-operatives thus did not benefit from scale of operations or from more efficient deployment of labour. Moreover the enterprises were just as constrained by a shortage of draught animals (their main traction power) as individual cultivators. Co-operative labour was organised on a 'work gang' basis but the gangs were rarely formed on the basis of compatibility, ability or performance. The result was less intensive

labour, delays in completing necessary tasks, and low output. The system of remuneration, which was modelled on the Chinese point system, was not well received by many peasants because they believed it encouraged shirking, incompetence and waste.

Local party and state agents frequently interfered in the work of the enterprises, often dictating cropping, harvesting and marketing plans. These same agents also expropriated land and other assets belonging to peasants and PAs to allocate to co-operatives whenever the latter requested them. This practice aroused widespread resentment among peasants. The eviction of peasants to make way for co-operatives was also routine. Peasants, particularly those working high-grade land, who did not wish to join co-operatives were frequently evicted and relocated in marginal areas.

Finally, while there were cases of voluntary or quasi-voluntary participation, the majority of co-operatives were set up without the consent of the peasants involved. The exceptions were enterprises which were initially formed at the request of landless or poor peasants. Some enterprises were planned by the authorities as show-case models promising high living standards and the use of modern technology, and some peasants may have been attracted by the prospect and joined voluntarily. Nevertheless, the general rule was that peasants were either pressured in indirect ways, enticed by false promises or forced outright to co-operate by local state agents and party cadres. This was *the* critical factor which contributed the most to the poor record of producer co-operatives.

The story of state agriculture is one of mismanagement, of wasted resources, and financial loss on a large scale. State agriculture was initially cobbled together out of a large number of previously privately owned mechanised farms, many of which were loss-making and burdened with debt, and its difficulties, which were apparent from the start, grew enormously from year to year. Yet it was the beneficiary of unrestricted government largesse. In the 1980s more than two-thirds of annual capital expenditure on agriculture went to state farms, which in return provided less than 5 per cent of the country's food needs. In the beginning state farms' holdings were small, but less than half a decade later they had expanded fourfold. This feverish expansion, which also involved peasant evictions, turned out later to have been poorly planned, and in some cases environmentally damaging. Some large-scale farm complexes were subsequently abandoned, owing, among other things, to poor planning, mismanagement and/or abusive labour deployment practices.

In brief, socialisation was plagued with inefficiency, waste of resources, mismanagement and poor morale among participants and employees. To the surrounding peasantry, socialised enterprises, particularly co-operatives, were a threat, a burden, or unwelcome competitors for resources. The enterprises were highly favoured by the state even though their contribution to the nation's food needs or to state revenue was almost negligible. Co-operatives and state farms alike relied on *corvée* peasant labour in peak seasons: peasants were compelled to work on them during ploughing, weeding and harvesting but were not paid for their work, and on occasions they were expected to meet their own expenses if the work lasted more than a day.

Rural policy was also highly extractionist, and land reform and socialisation served the extractive purposes of the military state very well. Socialist enterprises had to sell all their surplus produce to state agencies at prices that were pegged very low by the government. Peasants in turn had to hand over a predetermined quota of grain to the state purchasing agency, the Agricultural Marketing Corporation (AMC), at similar prices; the grain quota was imposed on all peasants living in what the government determined were surplus producing regions, and this in effect involved about four-fifths of the country's farm households. The government distorted the grain market to the great disadvantage of peasant producers by attempting to regulate grain prices and the flow of grain in the country. In the period 1985–89 AMC's share of the domestic grain market reached a little over one-third of the total, and peasant quota deliveries supplied more than half of this (ONCCP, 1990). The justification for grain requisitioning was that it would hold food prices down in the urban areas, and undermine and, in the long run, eliminate private grain marketing. In the end, none of these objectives was achieved: peasants continued to be squeezed by AMC and skinned by grain merchants, while food prices in the urban areas rose steadily all though the period under discussion.

In the end AMC became an abomination to most peasants: it arbitrarily imposed grain quotas on each household, and squeezed everyone for their produce whether they had it or not. In some areas peasants were asked to deliver grain which they had not grown, and in others the quota allocated exceeded the peasant's harvest. In Wollo province in 1985/86, when most peasants were suffering from famine, AMC refused to relieve peasants of their quota obligations. Many peasants had to sell the emergency supplies they had received in the relief effort and buy the grain at exorbitant prices on the open market to deliver to AMC. Requisitioning measures taken by AMC staff in the field were frequently coercive and abusive. Corruption among AMC functionaries in the field was rampant: grain collected from the hard-pressed peasantry and destined for government storage was illicitly sold to grain merchants at a handsome profit. Marx once said that when the French peasant talks of the devil he pictures him in the guise of a tax collector. To many peasants in Ethiopia, AMC must have looked like the devil too.

The extractive effort of the state was not confined to grain requisitioning. The peasant had to pay an agricultural tax, and land use fees, which were uniformly levied on all households. The poor were hurt more than others. Far more onerous, however, were what were called 'voluntary contributions' which all peasants were obliged to pay since land reform. These were neither voluntary nor contributions but levies imposed for a variety of purposes. Peasants had to pay levies for famine relief, in support of the war effort against Somalia, for rehabilitation of war victims, for national defence, etc.; they also had to pay for literacy and similar development programmes under way in their communities. Other, smaller extractions were added every year, often on the initiative of local officialdom. In a small district in southern Ethiopia where I did fieldwork, I estimated that in 1988/89 what was siphoned off in the form of taxes, 'contributions' and other state exactions made up a third to half the annual cash income of a

middling and poor peasant respectively (Dessalegn, 1990: 35). There is evidence, though much of it is still hidden from the public, that some of the money raised by means of such 'contributions' ended up in the pockets of party and government officials.

STATE-PEASANT RELATIONS

Land reform changed both the social structure of rural society and the relations between state and peasantry. Under the old regime the state, which was represented by the landed classes, was a relatively distant object to the peasant. At the lower level of administration, i.e. at the point closer to the peasantry, the machinery of government was heavily staffed by the local gentry, while higher-level officials came from the bigger landed elements. Contact between peasants and officialdom was relatively infrequent, and occurred either when peasants needed services or the redress of grievances through the legal apparatus. If they happened to be tenants they had more frequent contact with the landlord. Land reform promptly changed all that.

Removing the landed classes from rural society cleared the way for direct access to the peasantry and greater state intrusion. In the past, as far as the peasant was concerned, the government at the local level consisted in the main of the Ministry of Finance for collecting taxes, and the district administration and the courts for all other purposes. Now there were a host of state and party agencies, as well as the apparatus of the PA itself, all making heavy demands on the peasant household. The structures included (aside from the old ones) the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ethiopian Serategnoch Party (ESP), AMC, the farm and district-level PAs and, in coffee-growing areas, the Ministry of Coffee and Tea. The object of all was to make demands on peasant resources – taxes, 'contributions', food or cash crops, free labour, and later young men for military conscription – and to prepare peasants for the government's socialist ventures such as co-operatives, villagisation and resettlement schemes. The pressure on the peasant from all these quarters was high, and discontent grew.

As is shown in Table 1, the acceleration of collectivisation and other programmes occurred in the period 1983–88. This was also the period when the Ethiopian Serategnoch Party was set up, and when the politicisation of the economy and polity reached a high level. The party was the creation of the military regime and the sole political body allowed to function in the country (see Clapham, 1988: chapter 4, for its history). While the ESP appeared well after the major political and economic (including agrarian) policies had been formulated and set in motion (here I differ from Clapham, who attributes responsibility for the major policies to the party), it did nevertheless play no small part in propelling the course of events.

A word here about party and state agents in the rural areas. These petty officials, who came mostly from the marginal elements of the petty bourgeoisie, shared a lot in common. Both were ignorant of peasant society and often contemptuous of peasants, regarding them as inferior and backward. There was a strong urban bias among them, perhaps because many of them had small-town and provincial roots. Certainly the peasant had no friend in

the state or party apparatus. The first loyalty of both types of official was to themselves, and only after their own interests had been served did they feel responsible to the state. But there were also certain differences between them. The political agents were less well trained, less experienced and less competent. They were, on the other hand, more unscrupulous and more hungry for the spoils of the revolution. The government functionaries, in contrast, were relatively better trained, more experienced and more professionally minded.

When the party was deployed in the countryside in the second half of the 1980s it aroused apprehension among many government officials. Even though the specific tasks of party officials were not clearly defined, many functionaries in the field felt that the ESP was a serious competitor. The contest for power between ESP and government officials, which broke out soon after, was fought on the back of the peasantry. ESP stalwarts pushed for the acceleration of the socialisation of agriculture while the technocrats, more pragmatic and less doctrinaire, wished to go slowly. The former, in particular, insisted on speeding up greatly the pace of co-operativisation and villagisation, two highly visible programmes. In public speeches and in the media this theme was strongly supported by higher officials, and anyone who hesitated on the issue was branded a counter-revolutionary. The line Ministries in the field, which had earlier down-played the ideological element and emphasised the technical and organisational aspects of the new rural programmes, subsequently gave up the contest and embraced the position of their opponents. Shortly thereafter, and in particular in 1986–88, when it reached a peak, extension agents, officials of the local administration and other officials were vying with ESP to promote and speed up collectivisation and villagisation programmes.

Many political cadres in the field as well as a good number in higher positions were not seriously convinced of the soundness of the socialist programmes they were so actively pursuing; nor were there many among them who were aware of the complex dynamics of socialist enterprises, or of the immense human, material and technical resources that would be required to make such enterprises viable.⁴ Indeed, a significantly large number of cadres in the field were ignorant about agriculture in general. But none of this really mattered: the cadres were engaged in a power struggle and, at the time, the success or failure of enterprises or peasant well-being was not of serious concern to them. What they were doing in effect was laying claim to ‘agricultural socialisation’ as the exclusive domain of the ESP, thereby preparing a weapon that would ensure them ascendancy over their rivals in the bureaucracy whom they suspected of foot-dragging and covert opposition even after the latter had given up the fight. Victory in this struggle was not to be solely ideological but was to provide direct access to power and the material benefits that would come with it.

The objective was not just to set up co-operatives, village schemes and the like but also to control their operations, their decision-making bodies and their resources. All such enterprises came to be run by the political cadres, assisted occasionally by extension agents, as soon as they were formed; control over production was effectively taken out of the hands of the co-operators from the start. The formal managers, the ‘elected’

peasants, could not often decide even on routine matters. It was not uncommon, for example, for peasant co-operators to wait for the decision of the party agents before dividing up the harvests of their enterprises among themselves (much of the harvest was used for auto-consumption), or deciding on prices for their marketed surplus and sideline products. On occasions this led to serious food shortage among families because the agents concerned took an inordinately long time to make up their minds and to communicate their decisions to the enterprises.

All through the latter part of the period in question considerable manpower and resources were deployed to accelerate the pace of socialisation. Large numbers of co-operative and village schemes appeared very quickly, and many peasants not yet involved were given notice that their turn would soon come. Such was the speed of acceleration that many co-operatives were poorly planned, and large numbers of villages were hastily built, often in locations which were unsuitable for human habitation. The end result was the destabilisation of the peasantry, and the disruption of the institutionalisation of the land reform. Peasant agriculture suffered greatly as a consequence.

In the course of collectivisation and other similar programmes peasant evictions and relocations took place on a large scale, and this further aggravated peasant discontent. While there is not sufficient documentation on the subject so far, the evidence available does provide a good picture of the magnitude of evictions and relocations. According to a government report commissioned by the Council of Ministers, evictions and relocations for a wide variety of socialist programmes, including villagisation (but not resettlement), involved nearly 2 million households (or over 8 million people) in the 1980s (MoA, 1989b: 156). More than half a million households, mostly from north-east Ethiopia, were relocated in the western lowlands of the country in the emergency resettlement programme of the mid-1980s (Dessalegn, 1989).

Peasant relocations were also carried out by a number of government agencies for a variety of purposes, of which two are noteworthy (MoA, 1989b: 31–7). The Ministry of Education displaced some 80,000 households in the 1980s for its school building programme. Each time a rural school was built land was taken from the surrounding peasantry, and each school was allotted 10 ha of land for its upkeep. The Ministry of Agriculture has similarly displaced nearly 38,000 households for some of its forestry and extension programmes. This figure is, in my view, an underestimate, and if the evidence from all the other programmes of the Ministry were available the number of displaced peasants would be much higher.

Of particular interest to us here are peasant evictions which were carried out in the course of agricultural socialisation, i.e. to make way for co-operatives, state farms and similar projects. Table 2 gives an indication of the extent of such evictions in the 1980s. The total population displaced in these programmes was between 1.8 million and 2.0 million. The government report from which the data are taken notes that some of the figures were based on incomplete records, and that the real magnitude was much higher. The report does not distinguish between relocations and evictions, but it is evident from the text that evictions were mostly the rule where

TABLE 2 Peasant evictions and relocations during socialisation, 1980–89

<i>Projects</i>	<i>Households (No.)</i>	<i>Land (ha)^a</i>
Co-operatives	304,078	448,374
State agriculture ^b	106,127	197,403
Water and energy ^c	31,961	19,970
Total	442,166	665,747

Notes^a One hectare (ha) = 2.47 acres.^b Includes state farms and Ministry of Coffee and Tea schemes.^c Mostly irrigation and dam projects planned for collectives and/or large-scale public or joint-venture agricultural and agro-industrial enterprises. In some of the relocations in these projects, families were paid sixty-six birr each (US\$32 at the official rate of exchange, about US\$10 at the free-market rate) as compensation for the loss of their homes and crops (MoA 1989b: 33), a pitifully low price for such assets.*Source.* Ministry of Agriculture, 1989b: 32–8, 156.

collectivisation and large-scale projects were involved (Dessalegn, 1987b). While attempts were made to provide evicted peasants with land (often it meant relocation to marginal areas), many could not be accommodated and were left landless. Although the evidence is not available at the moment, there is good reason to believe that landlessness, which was not significant in the post-reform period, increased considerably in the second half of the 1980s (Dessalegn, 1990). In areas of high population density, such as Wollo and highland Harrarghe provinces, for example, where marginal land has long been under cultivation, relocation proved very difficult.

Land reform also redefined the power structure of rural society. The landed classes, the dominant elements of peasant society, were swept out of the rural world. The new rural elite, at the time in question still in the process of formation, was not necessarily the well-to-do farmer but the peasant *made* by the revolution. Such peasants were often ‘elected’ officials of rural mass organisations, in particular of PAs, and service and producer co-operatives. Many of these leaders were made party members, and in 1989 and 1990 could be seen proudly sporting their party uniforms. There was a close link between the peasant elite on the one hand and party and state officials on the other. Indeed, it could be said that the two were locked in a hungry embrace, for the former had access to accumulated resources; the latter, access to power, however humble it may have been. Leaders of mass organisations were supposed to be elected democratically by their constituents, but they were frequently kept in office with the connivance of their mentors in the party and government.

These mass organisations were new to rural Ethiopia, but the most important factor that endeared them to local officialdom was that they were a source of accumulated capital. Service co-operatives, for example, which were mostly marketing enterprises and were separate from the (producers’) co-operatives we have been dealing with, had large amounts of money

in their possession. Service and producer co-operatives between them handled millions of birr annually.⁵ Although PAs were much poorer, they too raised considerable sums of money every year through membership fees, the sale of firewood and grass, and other sources. Some of the well endowed PAs in the district I did my field work in southern Ethiopia in, for example, used to earn up to 50,000 birr in revenue annually, and this was a large income for a PA. The most common item of expenditure in the financial records of many service co-operatives and Peasant Associations in this same district was entitled *mestengido* (entertainment). This frequently involved wining and dining visiting party and state officials, and occasionally offering them 'gifts' of cash in the hope that this would earn the organisation special favours. Needless to say, the frequency of official visits to PAs and co-operatives was quite high.

Allegations of high levels of financial mismanagement among service and producers' co-operatives began to appear in some of the reports of the Ministry of Agriculture in 1986. The Ministry was charged with the task of auditing the records of both types of co-operative, but it was never able to perform its task adequately because its auditing unit was chronically understaffed; on average only between 20–25 of the more than 7,500 enterprises in the country were audited each year, which meant that many co-operatives were either not audited at all or audited insufficiently. According to the Ministry's reports, the sums lost through mismanagement were quite large, and each year financial practices grew to be more and more suspect (MoA, 1987a, b, 1988a, b, 1989a). The Ministry attributed the problem to poor financial management practices, poor record-keeping and insufficient training of co-operative staff. But there was more to it than that.

In the financial year 1986/87 the Ministry reported that the records of the co-operatives it had managed to audit showed that about 15 million birr was unaccounted for; in 1987/88 the figure was about 6 million, and in 1988/89 it was 4 million. In an investigative survey of 658 service co-operatives in Arssi and Shoa provinces in 1988 (about half the total in the area), the Regional Planning Office for Central Ethiopia found that nearly 10 million birr was reported 'lost' by the enterprises (RPOCE, 1988: 37–41). On the basis of the evidence available, I estimate that in the years 1987–90 the co-operative enterprises in the country (both service and producers) 'lost' annually some 20 million to 25 million birr, most of which was embezzled outright. The Ministry's published reports point out that the culprits were elected officials of the co-operatives and unnamed persons often referred to as 'other individuals', a term probably intentionally vague to protect the authors of the reports. Responsibility for the misdeeds in fact extends beyond the rural elite and involves party (and in some cases state) officials at the local level. While the evidence is at present incomplete, it does link the party cadres with growing financial corruption among rural organisations; one confidential report of the Ministry in fact specifically identifies party officials as aiding and abetting embezzlement and corruption in co-operative enterprises and other rural organisations (MoA, 1989c: 10–11). Moreover, financial mismanagement was more flagrant and involved greater sums of money in those provinces where collectivisation and similar

programmes were more actively pursued, notably Shoa, Arssi, Harrarghe and Gojam (MoA, 1988a: 39).

REFORMING THE REFORM

The retreat from agrarian socialism came quite suddenly and unexpectedly. On 5 March 1990 Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, the head of the government and the party, announced far-ranging reforms in the economic sphere. The reforms marked a decisive turn-round in policy, a change from a centralised command economy constructed along Stalinist lines to what was called a 'mixed economy' (*Addis Zemen*, 6 March 1990). Interestingly enough, most of the reforms relating to land and rural production came into force with surprising speed – within a matter of days in some areas, and within a few weeks in others – largely on the initiative of peasants. In contrast, almost all the reforms concerning the modern sector of the economy remained on paper to the end.

Colonel Mengistu admitted that the main constraint on peasant agriculture had been insecurity of holdings. However, land was to continue to be under state control, though the land-use rights of peasants and PAs were to be legally protected. All 'unutilised' land was to be under the ownership of the state, while evictions and land alienation would not occur except under special circumstances and only in accordance with the law. The Government was of the opinion that security of rights of tenure would be ensured if the authority to administer land stayed in government hands. This was, of course, far from true: it was state interference in land administration, giving rise, as we have seen, to evictions, relocations and general insecurity of tenure which embittered peasants in the first place and set them against the state. Private ownership of land and secure title deeds, which would have been the better alternative in the circumstances, were ruled out.

The hiring of labour in agriculture, earlier disallowed, was now permitted. Land-use rights also became heritable. Previously, passing one's plots to one's heirs was complicated and in some instances impossible. Any resources on the land, including trees, vegetation, soil improvement measures and the like, were now to belong to the owners of the land, a right not respected previously. The right of co-operators to dissolve their enterprises was guaranteed. No member was to remain or be involved in co-operative ventures without his/her consent. If members decided to dissolve their enterprises (and this referred mostly to producers' co-operatives) they were to do so in a proper manner and with equal benefits to all. There was no mention of villagisation in the reforms, but the understanding of many peasants was that they were free to stay or leave the villages. Finally, the powers of the AMC to requisition grain from peasants and to pay fixed prices for it was withdrawn. Peasants were freed from delivering their quota of grain to AMC and were at liberty to market their produce anywhere and at competitive prices.

These, in brief, were some of the main provisions of the new reform which the regime was forced to concede by the pressure of events and by the escalating anti-government insurgency in the countryside. We should

note in passing that the retreat from socialism was not prompted by recognition on the part of the authorities that the policies pursued since the revolution had failed and had in fact been responsible both for the deepening agricultural crisis and for the alienation of the peasantry from the state; rather, the reforms were seen as a necessary (though painful) tactical retreat to win back the initiative (as well as the territories) lost to rural-based anti-government forces.

The dismantling of producers' co-operatives and village schemes by peasants came immediately after the reform was announced. Co-operative peasants I interviewed in southern Ethiopia in early July 1990 stated that they started preparatory discussions among themselves to dissolve the enterprises about a week after the reform was announced. This was remarkable considering that news of the reform did not reach many rank-and-file peasants in time. Even before the reform, co-operators in Arssi province, which had one of the highest concentrations of co-operatives in the country, had demanded the dismantling of the enterprises, and earlier several co-operatives were actually dissolved on the initiative of their members.

A team of Oxfam consultants visiting eastern Harrarghe in April to evaluate the organisation's programmes there reported that most of the co-operatives in the province had been dismantled; Harrarghe had a large number of co-operative and villagisation schemes, some of which were considered highly successful by the authorities. In Weberra sub-province only one co-operative was left out of a total of thirty-six (oral communication). In July only a handful of co-operatives were still in existence in southern Ethiopia, and in many of these the redivision of assets had become contentious. All over the country the situation was the same: peasants swiftly distributed the assets of the co-operative among themselves and moved back to private farming. Co-operators I talked to in July were happy that the co-operatives had broken up, and that they were now farming their own plots. By the end of the year no more than 5 per cent of the producers' co-operatives in the country (out of a total of more than 3,000) were still standing; service co-operatives, on the other hand, were not dismantled, although many of them suspended their activities for some time. In parts of southern Ethiopia peasants laid claim to the land operated by the state farms authority, and at the time of my visit some peasants were grazing their cattle on the authority's land (unthinkable only a short while ago); some PAs were even considering dividing up the property among their members. Later there were reports from Arssi and Bale provinces in the east of the country that some state farms had been taken over by the surrounding peasantry.

As was noted above, the dismantling of co-operatives was carried out by the peasants themselves. State and party agents were unwilling to intervene. In fact I was informed by peasants in one district in Wollaita sub-province, southern Ethiopia, that extension agents were chased out of the rural areas by irate peasants. Further, some peasants here and in several parts of the country demanded that PA leaders closely associated with collectivisation, and with party and state officials, should be removed immediately. These leaders, they said, had been imposed on them by outside officials, and they wanted leaders of their own choice who would be

responsive and accountable to the people. This was an anti-corruption demand as much as a democratic one. Some PA leaders were party members, and together with their mentors in the party were suspected of misappropriating PA funds. Elections did take place in some PAs, and the old leadership was replaced. Whether this marks the beginning of the democratisation of PA structures remains to be seen.

The fate of villagisation schemes was also similar, although fewer schemes were dismantled compared with co-operatives, at least at the time of my field visits. This may have been partly because of the difficulties involved in rebuilding homesteads, and partly because the reform was silent about villagisation. It should be noted in this connection that while both collectivisation and villagisation were unwelcome to the great majority of peasants, the former aroused greater resentment than the latter because it entailed dispossession and the loss of autonomy of the peasant household. Nevertheless, in many parts of the country large numbers of peasants abandoned the villages and moved back to their previous home sites.

CONCLUSION

In Ethiopia as in other peasant-based societies the agrarian question will continue to be a critical issue, determining the boundaries of the economy and the viability of the polity. While many historians and social scientists often shied away from the rural world and just as often failed to give it the credit it deserves, the Ethiopian peasantry has been, at least in this century, a significant factor in the political history of the country. Rural unrest of one sort or another has not been infrequent in the period since the 1920s, although whether such incidents were authentic peasant rebellions affirming genuine peasant aspirations will remain a debatable question for quite some time. In my view, it was through traditional forms of passive resistance – the complexity and subtlety of which has been neither fully recognised nor examined – and occasionally through active sympathy with insurgents fighting against unpopular authority that the peasantry has made its mark on political and historical change.

When the imperial regime of Haile Selassie fell it was hardly mourned by the peasantry; the regime's long years of neglect of peasant grievances, and its overt commitment to the landed classes whose greed and exploitation were widely resented, had won it few friends among the rural population. Indeed, if it had not been for the active support of the peasantry following the land reforms – support in the form of unrest, protests and confrontations with landlords and landlord elements – the disintegration of the landed classes, which was complete by the second half of 1976 (Dessalegn, 1987a), and the consolidation of power by the Dergue (the military officers behind the junta), would not have been so easily achieved, or achieved at all. Embittered by over a decade of agrarian socialism, exhausted by years of hunger, famine and the depredations of state and party officialdom, the peasantry abandoned the military state and withdrew to its own traditions and world of discourse. The sons of the peasantry, who were pressed into military service and rudely thrown onto the battlefield, simply refused to fight and thus contributed to the disintegration of the junta's military

machine. In these and numerous other ways the peasantry ultimately helped bring about the collapse of the Dergue, one of the most brutal and most destructive regimes in the country's history.

In view of the drastic political changes that have occurred in the country with the collapse of the military government, the issue of agrarian reform policy and state-peasant relations has once again become pressing. It is my view that the construction of a meaningful partnership between state and peasantry is a necessary first step, if only for pragmatic reasons, since no other social class is as significant as the peasantry economically and politically. To avoid the mistakes of the past and the failures of the future, the legacies of the last fifteen years should be scrutinised objectively and critically. I believe reforms are best which enforce free smallholder proprietorship by anchoring it firmly within a pluralist agricultural structure; it would be falling into another doctrinaire trap to argue in favour of making small-scale peasant enterprise the only form of rural production. A judicious mix of forms of production which includes large-scale operations (private and public), co-operatives and settlement schemes based on free and voluntary participation, as well as independent peasant enterprises, is both feasible and desirable.⁶ Secondly, reform should aim at promoting the rise of an independent and self-assertive peasantry, because such an autonomous peasantry is a strong asset in rural development. Social equity in reform should be viewed not as a moral obligation but rather as a form of long-term investment.

NOTES

¹ This work is based in part on field material I collected in southern Ethiopia in 1989 and 1990. Owing to lack of space the subjects of food shortages and famine and of rural insurgency will not be dealt with.

² Cohen and Isaksson (1988) argue that there was a debate among policy-makers on whether to adopt the smallholder model or the agrarian socialist model. *There was no such debate!* Agrarian socialism was launched by fiat soon after the authorities embraced socialism. Harbeson (1988) argues that the failure of rural policy was due mainly to shortcomings in 'reform management'. It is true that management was poor but, even if the story had been different, collectivisation would have failed, because peasants were unwilling to give up private farming. For a recent bibliography of rural policies in the period under discussion see references in Pausewang *et al.* (1990).

³ The discussion up to the end of the section is based mostly on Dessalegn (1984, 1987b, 1989, and forthcoming). See also Clapham (1988) and the contributions in Pausewang *et al.* (1990). Unless otherwise stated, the term 'co-operatives' refers to 'peasant producers' co-operatives', a form of collective agriculture, and not to 'peasant service co-operatives' which were marketing and consumer enterprises.

⁴ The observations that follow are based on my extended field experience in the years between 1984, when the ESP was founded, and 1990, when the party was in virtual paralysis in the rural areas; it is also based on numerous discussions I held with ESP cadres in the field and in higher positions.

⁵ At the official rate of exchange, US\$1.00 = 2.07 birr, I estimate that in 1986–88 the two enterprises combined had liquid assets worth about 150 million birr.

⁶ A strong case can be made for agricultural pluralism, and I have tried to do that in Dessalegn (1987b). Cohen and Isaksson (1988) have presented arguments favouring the smallholder model, a case I believe to be built on personal predilection rather than sound evidence.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A draft of this article was distributed for discussion in January 1991, some four months before the military regime of Mengistu fell from power. I have revised the draft following criticisms by several readers for this journal, and changed words and phrases here and there, but the essential arguments of the earlier version remain unchanged. I have added the opening lines and recast the conclusion for obvious reasons.

Abstract

This article reviews the agrarian policies of post-revolution Ethiopia and discusses the evolution of relations between the peasantry and the military state in the period 1975–90. In broad terms, state policy changed rapidly from simple, home-flavoured populism in the latter part of the 1970s to hard-line Stalinism in the 1980s. The various rural policies that followed, such as collectivisation, villagisation and resettlement, and their effect on the peasantry are briefly assessed. The central point is that these policies impeded the institutionalisation of the populist land reform, politicised agricultural programmes to the detriment of rural production, and embittered relations between state and peasantry. The article also deals with the structure of power in rural Ethiopia as it was beginning to emerge out of the radical reforms of the period in question. The newly evolving rural elite, peasants active in rural mass organisations, is shown to be closely linked with the state apparatus. The hardening of state policy on the one hand, and peasant resentment on the other, soon led to a sort of unholy alliance between the forces of the state at the local level and the rural elite, giving rise to corruption on a large scale. The rapid escalation of rural insurgency, while not directly addressed, is shown to have been a consequence of the deterioration of relations between peasants and the state. The reform of agrarian Stalinism hurriedly launched in 1990 – discussed at some length in the last section of the article – came much too late to rally the peasantry to the side of the state.

Résumé

Cet article passe en revue les politiques agricoles de l'Éthiopie post-révolutionnaire et commente l'évolution des relations entre la paysannerie et l'État militaire dans les années 1975–1990. Grosso modo, la politique de l'État est rapidement passé d'un populisme simple, empreint de nationalisme, de la fin des années '70 à un stalinisme pur et dur. Rapidement l'article recense les différentes politiques rurales qui se succédèrent, telles que la collectivisation, la 'villagisation' et la relocalisation des populations, ainsi que l'effet de ces mesures sur la paysannerie. Il met l'accent sur le fait que ces politiques empêchèrent l'institutionnalisation de la réforme agraire populiste, politisèrent la programmation agricole au détriment de la production, et aggravèrent les relations entre l'État et le monde paysan. L'article s'intéresse également à la structure du pouvoir dans le milieu rural éthiopien au moment où il commençait à émerger des réformes radicales de la période considérée. L'on voit que la nouvelle élite rurale qui se constitue, les paysans qui s'impliquent dans les

organisations agricoles de masse, sont tous étroitement liés à l'appareil de l'Etat. Le durcissement de la politique gouvernementale d'une part et le mécontentement des paysans d'autre part conduisirent promptement à une sorte d'alliance maudite entre les forces gouvernementales au niveau local et l'élite rurale, engendrant une corruption à grand échelle. Et l'on voit que l'escalade rapide de l'insurrection paysanne, alors même qu'elle ne vise directement personne, est une conséquence de la détérioration des relations entre les paysans et l'Etat. La réforme du stalinisme agraire lancée en hâte en 1990, assez longuement étudiée dans la dernière partie de l'article, est arrivée beaucoup trop tard pour rallier la paysannerie.